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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1669  
INFO RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2194  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2489  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000579

SIPDIS

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DEPT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/PI, ECA/FO  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/ZARATE  
OVP FOR HANNAH AND KAREM

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/28/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [EAID](#) [OEXC](#) [OVIP](#) [PROP](#) [SY](#)  
IS, LE  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: INDEPENDENT SHIA SEEK TO COUNTER  
HIZBALLAH DOMINANCE

REF: A. BEIRUT 573

- [1](#)B. BEIRUT 488
- [1](#)C. BEIRUT 571
- [1](#)D. BEIRUT 520
- [1](#)E. BEIRUT 570
- [1](#)F. 07 BEIRUT 1597
- [1](#)G. BEIRUT 560

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In an April 28 session at independent Shia NGO Hayya Bina four independent Shia figures met with the Charge to discuss efforts to counter Hizballah's influence in Lebanon. The interlocutors support the ideals of March 14, but they are critical of the political leadership which has mismanaged Shia relations for the last three years. Some other common themes of discussion emerged: the lack of a truly independent Lebanese media outlet, the need to further expand existing U.S. educational exchange opportunities for Shia students, the need to quickly address electoral reform issues, and the need to strengthen the GOL's institutions in order to provide citizen services. They also believe the USG should strategically target future USG assistance in a way that will undermine Hizballah and promote the GOL. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On April 28, the Charge and Special Assistant visited the offices of the Hayya Bina Foundation (Ref B). In the final phases of preparing for the upcoming May 3-9 visit to Washington, Hayya Bina founder Lokman Slim organized a roundtable with four fellow members of the delegation: Rami Al Amin, who is a journalist; Dr. Farid Mattar, a physician; Malek Mrowa, a businessman; and Dr. Saoud Al Mawla, a sociology professor. (Note: See paragraph 17 for full delegation bios. End Note.)

"We Support the March 14 'Moment'"

[1](#)3. (C) The interlocutors said that they agreed with the principles expressed by March 14 three years ago. They firmly believe that a free, sovereign and democratic Lebanon is in the best interest of the entire populace. "We believe in the ideals expressed during that crucial 'moment' on March 14, 2005. However, they lost us on March 15 when they

returned to 'business as usual.'" These individuals agree that it is important for the independent Shia to maintain a separate identity from the party politics of March 14 coalition. Though critical of March 14's approach towards to independent Shia to date, they stand ready to follow a parallel and complimentary path which pursues the same national goals.

#### Shia Want Freedom of the Press and Independent Media Outlet

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¶4. (C) Rami al Amin, a young journalist, believes that in a media market controlled either by March 8 or March 14, there is no outlet for independent Shia journalists. Born in 1984 and well-known for his article "How I Was Orphaned By Hizballah," he said that he and his fellow Shia journalism students have grown up in an environment where self-censorship is a necessary skill if one wants to remain employed. (Note: MEPI funds have supported an International Republican Institute program to examine this self-censorship issue. End Note.)

¶5. (C) Rami, Lokman and the others agreed that they are called in by the media as independent Shia commentators only when March 8 and March 14 are actively attacking each other. If the two sides declare a truce, the Shia figures say they can't get anyone to return their calls. This "information blackout" has hampered the efforts of independent Shia to present their case to the public and to refute the religious and political edicts of Hizballah.

¶6. (C) Rami hopes the Lebanese and international media will become more informed. He said that while the media takes the

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time to differentiate between different blocks of Lebanese Christians, they tend to lump all Shia together into one category. He said it is time for Lebanon to have a media outlet which supersedes religious or party orientations and focuses on issues of national concern.

#### More Academic Exchanges Will Promote Democratic Values

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¶7. (C) Dr. Saoud al Mawla, a sociology professor at Lebanese University, told us that Hizballah's administrative stranglehold at the Lebanese University (with 70,000 students) represented an attack on a national institution even more important than the Lebanese Armed Forces. He estimates that more than 80 percent of the 2,000 faculty members do not support Hizballah, yet they are censored in their academic environment by Hizballah supporters who serve as the university's deans and senior leadership.

¶8. (C) He urged the Charge to increase the number of slots for Lebanese students to participate in academic exchange programs in the U.S. "For a young person from the south, this may be their only exposure to democratic values." He asked that additional places be made available in order to promote critical thinking and independent opinion among the Shia youth. "Each student you send will be a priceless investment in Lebanon's future."

#### Proportional Representation and Electoral Reform

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¶9. (C) The delegates were critical of March 14's approach to electoral reform. "You, the USG, financially supported the work of the Boutros Commission in 2004-2005. This expert panel put together a series of sensible recommendations to bring Lebanon in line with international electoral standards. Yet it is your allies in March 14 who are the ones standing in the way of progress. All they care about is preserving

their own petty interests." (Note: This sentiment is shared by a number of our civil society interlocutors on electoral reform. Future Movement leader Saad Hariri's opposition to proportional representation is well-known. End Note.)

¶10. (C) The independent Shia clearly see proportional representation as a way for them to gain political strength. One delegate told us that in the 2000 parliamentary elections, Hizballah only won 53 percent of the Shia vote. Yet under the "winner take all" model, they gained all of the Shia seats. Consolidating their power base in advance of the 2005 election, Hizballah used threats and intimidation at the local level to improve their results. Proportional representation during the 2009 elections would allow independent Shia votes to also play a role in the national political process.

¶11. (C) In addition to the various electoral reform proposals that are currently being discussed, the delegates were frustrated by March 14 inability to come up with a solid position on the issue. "Regardless of how it turns out, we need to know the rules ahead of time so we can come up with our own strategies. People are convinced that Sunni/Future Movement leader Saad Hariri and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt are going to make a last-minute, back room deal with March 8 to suit their own purposes -- even if it means cutting the legs out from underneath the independent Shia."

USG Assistance Should "Strategically Support"  
GOL's Provision of Services

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¶12. (C) The delegates agree that the Government of Lebanon's national institutions and its profile in the south should be strengthened. They are frustrated that Hizballah continues to claim credit for projects which, in fact, have been paid for by the GOL and/or international donors.

¶13. (C) They asked the Charge to consider a new "strategic" approach for future USG assistance programs in the region. The delegates offered to come to the Embassy to act as a

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advisory board for future program initiatives targeted in the south and in the Bekaa Valley. They feel that their "on-the-ground experience" will provide useful input as U.S. Mission Beirut considers various USAID, MEPI, DRL and PD project proposals.

Slim Dismisses Tufayli's Strategic Utility

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¶14. (C) In a side-bar conversation with the Charge, Lokman Slim echoed Saad Hariri's assessment that former Hizballah SYG Tufayli would not/not be a useful ally to the independent Shia (Ref A). Slim said that he had visited Tufayli on a number of occasions, but found him to be untrustworthy. He thinks Tufayli is "only in it for the money" and has no real following in the Bekaa Valley. "He brings nothing to the table." Ahmad al-Assad had earlier urged us to cultivate this contact (Ref C), but Assad appears to be the only advocating this approach.

¶15. (C) Slim also told us that the Mufti of South Lebanon, Sayyed Ali Al Amine, praised by many for his courageous stance against Hizballah, is facing increasing criticism from pro-Hizballah forces. There is talk that the Higher Shia Council leadership had threatened to remove the Mufti from his official position in Tyre.

Comment

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¶16. (C) Having met with and listened to the delegation put together by Lokman Slim, we continue to believe that this group presents a more credible and realistic approach to

independent Shia issues that Ahmad al-Assad (Ref C). We will be reaching out to contacts in Washington this week to request high-level meetings. End Comment.

#### Independent Shia Delegation Members

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¶17. (U) -- Lokman Slim is a publisher and filmmaker (Ref A). He is co-founder of the Hayya Bina Foundation, which promotes civil liberties. He and his wife also founded the Umam Documentation and Research Center, a cultural association dealing with Lebanon's civil war history (Ref D).

-- Rami Al Amin is a young journalist working at the NowLebanon.com news portal. He is also acting as a researcher on freedom of the press issues for the Samir Kassir Foundation. Al Amin has authored a number of pieces which criticize the control that Hizballah exerts over his Southern Beirut neighborhood and his generation of Shia youth. He received widespread acclaim for his piece, "How I Was Orphaned by Hizballah."

-- Malek Mrowa is a self-described secularist, businessman and board member of the Democratic Renewal Movement headed by Nassib Lahoud. He is also the brother of Jameel Mrowa (also spelled Jamil Mroue), editor of the Daily Star newspaper.

-- Dr. Saoud al Mawla is a sociology professor at the Lebanese University who has been active in organizing Muslim-Christian dialogue initiatives. He served as the private secretary to the former head of the Higher Shia Council, Mohammad Shams ad-Din, until his passing. He is a noted and outspoken critic of Hizballah.

-- Dr. Farid Matar is an OB/GYN who trained at UT-Memphis. He decided to return to Lebanon to practice and raise his family because he wanted to be "part of the change" in Lebanon. He describes himself as an average concerned citizen who grew up in a tolerant Shia household that was typical in his youth. He told us that this delegation is part of his efforts to become pro-active about the political changes and progress he wants for his country. He is also first cousin to Mohamed Matar, a prominent Shia lawyer who is also working to strengthen the position of Lebanon's independent Shia (Ref E).

-- Dr. Mona Fayyad is a psychology professor at the Lebanese University. She has published numerous books and articles

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about the modern Shia experience in Lebanon (Ref F). Her article, "To Be a Shia Now," was carried widely in the international press.

-- Sheikh Maarouf Rahal is a practicing Shari'a judge and seminary teacher in Baabda, Beirut and Byblos. He also serves as an advisor to Sayyed Ali Al-Amin, the Mufti of South Lebanon (Ref G).

-- Duraïd Yaghi is a lawyer and Vice President of the Progressive Socialist Party. He was a former candidate for parliament from Baalbeck and serves as a senior advisor to Walid Jumblatt.

-- Sara el Dallal is a Program Assistant with Hayya Bina Foundation and is working on NDI's "Citizen Lebanon" program, a citizen awareness project Hayya Bina is leading the initiative for the Bekaa region.

-- Inga Schei is a Program Director with the Hayya Bina Foundation.

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